Good Friday 1904

Sacrifice and offering thou didst not desire: ~~burnt~~ burnt-offering and sin offering hast thou not required.

Then said I, Lo, I come; in the volume of the book it is written of me,

I delight to do thy will, O my God; yea thy law is within my heart.

Psalm 40. 6 — 8

No idea has been more deeply rooted in all the religions of the past than the idea of sacrifice. Every primitive religious rite has grown, in part, ~~out~~ from this source, and the belief in sacrifice of one kind or another still dominates, undoubtedly, the whole world's faith.

Men of every race and every creed, have developed the custom of making offerings to their deities. The fruits of the earth; grain from the harvest, and wine from the vintage; the blood of slain beasts and the incense of burning flesh; money, treasure, even human life itself, has been converted to a sacrifice, and has been

laid before the gods, with solemn words of prayer and thanksgiving, in the hope of winning or holding the favour such divine beings are able to bestow.

Now a custom so universal as this in the life of mankind must be fraught with much significance; and this is no reason why we should dismiss it from our notice as one of those mysteries of human nature too dark for us to understand. In some ways life is always more inexplicable than the inorganic world surrounding us: and yet, as we are ourselves alive, we ought to be capable of a sympathetic insight into the behaviour of other living men, quite as trustworthy, so far as it goes, as our knowledge of the laws which govern the forces of external nature.

We may be very sure, to begin with, that the custom of sacrifice has not originated from any particular form of belief. It antedates all creeds, and is perhaps older than the development of a reasoning faculty in the human mind. Philosophy indeed seldoms originates anything — in the realm of practical conduct. It comes

afterward to explain, or justify or criticise, what life has already builded. However our reason may modify and reform ~~this real sources of all that~~ what has come into being, as ~~part of human existence,~~ an established custom. ~~the~~ this real sources of it all go down into those deep impulses of the heart which obey a law higher than our wisdom can prescribe for them.

In this matter of religious sacrifice we can only account, I think, for the action of our race, by affirming the existence of a power above the human mind ~~and heart~~, to whose ceaseless demand men have ~~felt~~ endeavored to respond. Great movements of religious feeling have been as constant and as definite as the movement of the ~~the~~ tides of the sea; and nobody supposes that when the long tidal wave heaps itself ~~up~~ against our shores this is due to some irresponsible freak, or fancy, in the waters themselves. It is well known to us that the immense pull of the force

of gravitation exerted by heavenly bodies above the earth produces this movement: that it is as if the yielding ocean rose up, in response to this demand, to follow the moon wherever her course lies over the pathless waste of waters.

One day, if not now, the world will be wise enough to understand that the phenomena of mind are only to be explained on a like hypothesis. There must be a power above men, acting upon them sometimes in some simple definite way, to render their deeds so constant to one pattern, age after age.

The effect produced upon their plastic consciousness has been as if a dread authority continually overshadowing them were saying to them, out of the clouds, "Give! give! I want something that you possess, and which you must render to me before I can allow you to go your way in peace!"

At first, seeming to hear such a voice speaking to him from the sky, ~~he~~ feeling dimly that such demands were made upon him by somebody, or something unseen, stronger than himself; man gave what was next his hand: what custom had decreed; the cheapest gift he could utilize, perhaps, so that he could be satisfied his debt to the heavenly authorities was safely and honorably discharged.

He knew not why the gods should ask this of him: what pleasure or profit they could derive from his gift; but he had the feeling that something must be given, or he would incur their enmity.

But when, in the course of ages, the human spirit had grown up to accept and trust the revelation of an Eternal Love at the heart of the universe ~~the~~ former following the ways of men with ceaseless yearning for their answering regard, then the soul began to be able to understand its own position, and to interpret the facts of its religious history. From the beginning of man's career upon the earth a power has been with him

and over him which has wanted something that he alone could give; that is to say it has wanted himself: his love and loyalty, his gratitude and affection; his willingness to submit to the law of a higher than his own wisdom, and to be guided toward a better destiny than he could choose.

All the sacred rites of the past we may regard as the steps and stages by which the world has been advancing toward the perception of this truth: the great school in which it has slowly learned the lesson that the unrest so strongly felt pervading its spiritual being, is due to the ceaseless demand made upon it by an infinite love for some answering regard; and that therefore there is no rest for the soul till it arrives at ~~one~~ sense of filial relationship with the great power from which its life is derived.

It was natural that during long ages when

mankind was as a little child in its understanding of the mysteries of spiritual existence, it should strive by gifts of all things, some costly, to mark what it felt as a divine requirement laid upon its inmost heart. Here and there one arose, even in those earlier days, to perceive, with the Hebrew Psalmist, that sacrifice and burnt offering ~~were not required~~; and to say in response to the invitations of a Holy Spirit ever-more breathing ~~to~~ him, behind and before, "Lo! I come, to do thy will O God."

But only in the light of Christ's Gospel have men begun to see, together and continuously, a right interpretation of the ~~radical~~ fundamental facts of their higher life. That God is the Father of all souls, and loves them as a father loves his children; and that this influence must be more or less felt in every human heart, even long before there is ability to understand what this influence is, and what it means, - is now made

plain by the teaching which the word has received from the lips of Christ.

But there is another implication of the idea of sacrifice whose meaning may seem, at first, more perplexing and uncertain, that is which has grown to be, in one form or another, a doctrine of atonement for human sins; the idea of the efficacy of vicarious pain; the belief that one may suffer and sacrifice for the good of his fellow men.—

As a matter of doctrine it is the more astonishing that a belief like this should have grown to commanding weight, because it appears to be in direct antagonism with one of the strongest powers possessed by the human mind,— its native sense of justice.

It is not right, this sense affirms, that the innocent should be made to suffer in place of the guilty. It is not just in an Almighty judge, if he allows those who have sinned to go free, while he visits the penalty they have deserved

upon others who have done no wrong. The plea made by schoolmen and theologians that due regard for the claims of justice compelled God to stand from some innocent source the suffering due for human transgression, would disgrace even the cool of a half barbarous king. There it would be quickly seen and felt that, if the actual culprit was not to be made to pay in full for his iniquity, there could be no sense in forcing another to pay in his stead.

Yet notwithstanding this perfectly evident consideration, one of the great beliefs of Christianity is that in the atonement made by Christ; and no word of ancient prophecy has the later world found more fit, in its application to the author of our christian faith, than that which says "he was wounded for our transgressions and by his stripes we are healed."

The truth is that whether we can understand it or not; and whether it may seem just or unjust in our sight, the world is everywhere full of vicarious pain. The innocent do continually

suffer with and for the guilty, and the pure in heart frequently have to bear the reproach of a shame which the hardened conscience does not feel.

Much less than we commonly suppose, perhaps, is the scheme of Christian doctrine designed to ~~s~~ set forth some ideal, imaginative perfection that rules over the ways of men. But is ~~instead~~ instead an attempt to translate into ~~some kind of~~ intelligible form the facts of real life. It is all beside the mark to say that God could not, or should not, permit one of his children to sacrifice himself for others good: to give his life a ransom for many.

Vicarious suffering is a tremendous reality in this life of ours; and ~~for~~ with those who have learned that it is not for them to enter into judgement with the Almighty, there remains this ~~further~~ question how we may begin to see some light in these dark facts! What is the meaning of this good man's pain! What the significance of that tragedy again and

again heralded in the world's affairs, when mankind stones its prophets, and rejects those who bring to it, in the name of God, the very truth which is its salvation!

We are ready enough to see the guilty suffer, and to take our own punishment when we know that we have deserved it; It is reasonable and right, we say, that there should be sharp penalties to turn men back, if possible, after they have entered upon a way of transgression.

But why should the innocent so frequently have a still harder fate to bear? Why was it needful to the world's salvation that the one perfect man in human history should suffer crucifixion? How could it avail in the councils of heaven, or among the influences of earth, that his agony in Gethsemane, his scourging at the hands of cruel and brutal Roman soldiers, and his slow death of torture upon the cross, should work out man's redemption from ancient

iniquity and wrong?

Without undertaking to declare the whole purpose of divine wisdom, ~~entirely~~ we have found some certain light upon this problem if we reflect that ~~this~~ in the suffering of the guiltless there is a method, always working in the world, whereby the hardened mind ~~and conscience~~ is at last forced to admit through the gates of its consciousness a sense of the enormity of its guilt.

A man may say, "my life is my own, to dispose of as I please. If I choose to throw it away in idle pleasures that is my own affair. If I am willing to buy a temporary bliss at the expense of future pain, I can stand up and take my punishment when it comes; and this also is my own concern." That, in fact, is the plea which thousands of men, who know they are not living as they ought to live, make in defence of their course.

But when one begins to understand that he cannot throw away his own life without deeply injuring to some other life with which his own has been bound up: that the punishment which falls upon him is sure to inflict even a keener stroke upon some other heart that is dear to his record, that gives him pause in his downward career, and forces him to consider more carefully the consequences of his action.

The selfish mind may go on for a long time involving others in its own ruin without compunction. But even the most callous heart is seldom entirely destitute of human affection; and the awful reflection of its own evil, which it finally discerns in another spirit upon which it fondly leans, is one of the strongest warnings and incentives to turn it back from wrong. If that does not produce in the reckless soul a mood of repentance and reform, then nothing is likely to move it toward amendment of its ways: and, in this sad, many how good hope that no human being can bear the picture of ruin and distress

created by its action in other lives, without desire to repair that awful injury. We may be sure that, take the world together, the suffering of the innocent does operate to bring home to men a consciousness of the evil they have done, and to turn their thoughts toward better things.

In individual cases this law of atonement may seem slow to take effect: but we should remember that those spiritual forces which shape character and life are always deeper and broader in reach, in such wise that they may be defeated from their habitual course. A conquering nation, like England, may widely transform its outward methods of living for a subject race, as has been done in India, while yet the inward nature of that race is untouched by any change whatever.

Nothing is so hard to resist as any influence that leads to change, as the hardened heart; and they who expect that patient sufferance of wrong is to break down, immediately,

a disposition toward evil in the wrong-doers mind, underrate the power of that antagonist with which we are found to contend.

Nevertheless there are historic instances to teach us that the law is there, and is always slowly performing the work that God has set it to do. Above all other examples we can see how the cross of Christ has now become a throne of world-wide power; and that his unresisting acceptance of a death of shame has opened those gates through which our "King of Glory" has come in.

We can see how the martyrdom of Abraham Lincoln won to him the bitterly sore and disappointed heart of the south as it could have been given him on no other consideration, and for no other price. In ways like these it is made plain to us that the spectacle of injustice done to the good man's life does produce an effect upon the heart of mankind. We need not doubt that, though that heart be as

adamant, the rain of tears from innocent eyes will wear at last a channel through its flinty depths; and that this is what, through all the ages, vicarious suffering is designed to accomplish under the providence of God, for the whole world of men.

And so if we talk of the injustice of things because the guiltless in this world of ours are made to know such cruel pain, let us bethink ourselves that this is really God's way of redemption for his frail and erring children; and let us be grateful for the number of human hearts that are willing to follow Christ through whatever endurance and humiliation the spirit of sacrifice may lead.

It may make our blood boil with indignation to see what wrongs and indignities a brutal brute of a man can inflict upon the woman who has been yoked to him for life; how those who have the power delight to enslave and torture the victims of their lust and greed,

whom fate has committed to their ruthless keeping.
But there is another side to the picture. There is
the ~~patient~~ beautiful sufferance of those gentle
souls which bear, for love's sake, such abuses
heaped upon them, never doubting that at last
their night of weeping is to be turned into a day of
joy.

Aside from the wretchedness which men have
brought upon themselves by their misdoing, there
is, no doubt, an immense amount of pure dumb
agony in living hearts, which knows no reason for
its existence, and sees no hope of any good to be
accomplished by its means. To say what this is
for in the providence of God may be more than we
can attempt.

But also no little part of this world's
pain is that which good men and women, ~~have~~ resolutely
to bear as ~~the very result~~ an incident of their efforts to be
kind, and just and helpful in their relations
to their fellow men. And we are instructed
by the life and the example of Christ what
this ~~is for~~ means. In the light of his gospel

we can see it as the chief glory of our common humanity that it is made able, for love's sake, to bear such suffering without murmur or complaint; and can give men of this infinite treasure of beauty and innocence, to redeem in some measure the coarse features of brutality and vice.

For this is how the beast may when in human life may be finally transformed, not only into man, but into the very image and likeness of Christ; and this is how the angel of our being is to step forth at last from its prison house of flesh "made perfect through suffering."

Let the cross of Christ be to us as first, of course, a symbol of the patient majesty of his own spirit, which stooped from its high dwelling place to share the want and woe of earth's lowliest sons and daughters. But beyond that let it symbolize a way of God in all human history, whereby any soul may make itself an instrument of his redeeming love, and enter into the light that surrounds the sacrifice of the Son of God.